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FIRST RIVAL  
OF THE  
METROPOLITAN  
OPERA

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*John Frederick Cone*

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TO THESE FRIENDS AND THEIR CHILDREN—

*Ruth and Bernard Brandt*  
*Betty and Walter Hofmeister*  
*Jean and Jesse Reese*  
*Myra and Jan Rhebergen*  
*Miriam and Ira Wallach*

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## Foreword



IT HARDLY seems possible that one hundred years have passed since the opening of the Metropolitan Opera, an organization that came into being the same year as the Brooklyn Bridge but unlike the bridge was given birth for all the wrong reasons. That it now stands as a beacon of quality and standards in the opera world is part of an artistic miracle. All the “wrong reasons” were, of course, the social snobbisms of New York leveled against the new rich who came out of the Civil War with pockets bulging and a burning desire for a place in established society. Nothing represented the old guard so much as the Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street and Irving Place and the seasons of grand opera presented there, beginning in 1878, by the charming and clever “Colonel” James H. Mapleson, American manager of London’s Royal Italian Opera Company, Covent Garden. “Colonel” Mapleson—few seemed to know where his honorary title came from—had, at least at first, the confidence and support of his principal stockholders and patrons, who included the social arbiters of the city. They had long made the Academy their special preserve, and for these nabobs, as well as the general musical public who helped fill his seats, the Colonel presented performance after performance of great artists in the basic Italian repertoire. In 1878 he had the field to himself, but five years later, in 1883, he faced his first competitive challenge with the opening of the new upstart company. How he dealt with this threat, and failed to win, is the

essence of John Cone's fascinating book, and its publication this year during the Metropolitan centenary celebrations is another chapter in the ongoing relationship between Americans and the world of the opera.

For those of us who have spent a large part of our lives dealing with this elusive, maddening, frustrating, slippery, and glorious art form the one consistent message that emerges from the book is best described in the French expression that itself is almost a cliché—"plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"—the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Opera is really impossible: by all odds it should not work. The elements that must be tamed to bring it off—trustees, star singers, comprimarios, musicians, choruses, dancers, choreographers, designers, directors, and conductors, to say nothing of the basic personnel needed to run a theater itself—have not changed since the French composer Lully started the whole glorious procedure. In connection with the Metropolitan in this century alone you can pick up the memoirs or biographies of Giulio Gatti-Casazza, Edward Johnson, Sir Rudolf Bing, and my own to find the same agonies and ecstasies: all that is needed is to change the dates and the names of the players.

But our friend John Cone, who is obviously a serious opera fanatic and historian, has specialized in the competitive problems of the Metropolitan. An earlier book concerned the powerful and determined Oscar Hammerstein the First, an opponent even more formidable than the good Colonel.

The nature of opera is explosive, the tendency of modern business management is to govern by committee, and these two tracks are on a constant collision course. The reason an opera house is a success has traditionally been—and in my view must continue to be—the shadow and passion of the impresario. Mapleson was one: so was Oscar Hammerstein I and Gatti-Casazza and Johnson and Bing and, I hope, myself. By its very nature an opera company is adrift without the strong hand of a leader, someone with the skills to seduce, cajole, balance different visions and priorities, and in the end triumph perhaps because of impossibilities.



By writing this book, Dr. Cone has done the opera world a great service: he has shown us our ancestry, the grafting on, if you will, of an art form polished and perfected in Europe to the crudities and roughness of our society, and how one organization has managed to weather all odds and emerge victorious.

As you read this book you will be enthralled by the legend of Adelina Patti, surely the first “prima donna assoluta,” who dominated the Mapleson company much as Geraldine Farrar, Kirsten Flagstad, and Maria Callas were to do at the Metropolitan, each in their day. Hammerstein started out with the incomparable Edouard de Reszke and tried to engage his nonpareil tenor brother Jean, and the legends of opera companies and their stars have continued unbroken ever since.

Sometimes, as it happens, an operatic legend can be built in one's own family. My paternal grandfather, a fierce and devoted francophile, was a great friend of Jean de Reszke, and when he was dying my grandmother asked the tenor to come to their New York house, stand at the foot of the stairs, and sing a last time to her husband upstairs, confined to his bed. The story is that she held the bedroom door open while de Reszke sang from *Faust*, and my grandfather died when the aria was finished.

Of such stuff grand operas are made!

Schuyler G. Chapin

General Manager, Metropolitan Opera, 1972–1975

Dean, School of the Arts, Columbia University, 1976–

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